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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001680

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/YERGER

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER PARM SY IS LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: EUROPEANS SEE PROGRESS ON PRESIDENCY
FOLLOWING FOREIGN MINISTERS' VISIT

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) The Italian Ambassador to Lebanon, reporting on the October 19-20 visit of the French, Italian, and Spanish foreign ministers to Lebanon, noted progress in Speaker Berri's efforts to reach a consensus candidate and more conciliatory tones on the part of both Berri and PM Siniiora. Despite rumors in town that they back LAF Commander Michel Sleiman as president, the Europeans themselves are not pushing any candidate. The ministers sent a tough message on UNIFIL, promising to stay the course even if the situation deteriorates, and expressed support for Siniiora's proposed hybrid border security force. End summary.

¶2. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, met with Italian Ambassador to Lebanon Gabriele Checchia and Political Officer Carlo Jacobucci on October 26 at the Italian Embassy in Beirut. The meeting focused on the October 19-20 visit of French FM Kouchner, Italian FM D'Alema, and Spanish FM Moratinos. Overall, Checchia said, the ministers, who held separate meetings with PM Siniiora, Parliament Speaker Berri the Patriarch and a group of Lebanese political leaders from both sides, left with the impression that things were moving in the right direction. Checchia confirmed reports we have heard that D'Alema took the lead during the visit, noting that Moratinos stayed a bit on the side, perhaps chastened by Siniiora's reprimand for passing messages to Damascus that Lebanon had not approved and for not being tougher on Syria.

SINIORA: HALF PLUS ONE IS LAST RESORT

¶3. (C) According to Checchia, the ministers did not play the name game on the presidency, instead encouraging the Lebanese leaders to continue their dialogue in an effort to find a candidate with the "largest possible support." PM Siniiora reportedly told them that March 14 would only use a half plus one vote as a last option, but in the meantime had to play it as a strong negotiating card. Siniiora, who Checchia said was really tough on Syria in the meeting, derided the

opposition's attempts to "teach" March 14 the constitution.

EUROPEANS NOT PUSHING FOR SLEIMAN

¶4. (C) Refuting rumors on the Beirut streets, Checchia adamantly denied the ministers were pushing for a Sleiman candidacy, though he agreed that some might view it as an easy way out of the crisis. He explained that D'Alema had raised the possibility as a tactical strawman to gauge Siniora's reaction both to Sleiman himself and to amending the constitution to allow sitting government officials like Sleiman to run. However, Checchia stressed, even if some Italian leaders back home were in favor of a Sleiman presidency (NFI), that was not the Italian position. He agreed with the Ambassador that the Patriarch was key to avoiding a Sleiman presidency.

BERRI PUSHES FOR MORE U.S. FLEXIBILITY

¶5. (C) In his meeting with the three FMs, Berri reportedly asked them to pass a message to the U.S. to be more flexible and not push for half plus one, though he noted that he believed the U.S. was moving in the right direction. Checchia said Berri appeared more open to a more pro-March 14 candidate, as long that person was not anti-March 8, reportedly suggesting only that that person needed to be in line with March 8 "principles" and not lead to international isolation of Syria. Not for the first time, Checchia said, Berri hinted that Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun was no longer March 8's candidate. Berri promised to continue with his initiative to find a consensus candidate, including his on-going dialogue with majority leader Saad Hariri. Checchia, adding that he himself had met with Hariri on October 24, said Saad told him he believed Berri was sincere in his efforts but afraid of Syria. Saad further

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told Checchia that he and Berri were discussing unspecified non-politicians as consensus candidates.

HIZBALLAH WARNS AGAINST HALF PLUS ONE

¶6. (C) Reporting on the ministers' dinner with Lebanese political leaders at the French Ambassador's Residence des Pins on October 20, Checchia said resigned Hizballah Energy Minister Mohamad Fneish was very tough. Checchia, noting he had met privately with Fneish a few days later, said Fneish urged the Europeans to do whatever they can to stop a half plus one president, arguing this would lead to two governments and possible civil war. Hizballah would not provoke this, Fneish reportedly said, but its feeling was that March 14 did not want consensus. (Separately, the French DCM told DCM that Fneish's remarks were borderline threats about violence if consensus was not reached.)

PATRIARCH WORKING ON SHORT-LIST OF CANDIDATES

¶7. (C) The Patriarch, as usual, did not say much in his meeting with the ministers, Checchia reported. The ministers stressed the critical role of Lebanon's Christians. Archbishop Samir Mazloum (whom we note is close to March 8 figure Suleiman Franjeh) reported on the Patriarch's committee with Christian leaders to come up with a short-list of candidates, which they hoped to complete by October 27. The list then would be submitted to the top five Christian leaders for their approval, then to the Patriarch, and finally to Speaker Berri and majority leader Saad Hariri.

TOUGH MESSAGE ON UNIFIL

¶8. (C) Checchia confirmed that there was strong European

resolve not to back down on UNIFIL. D'Alema reportedly sent a clear message that Italian troops would not leave Lebanon if the situation deteriorates, dispelling any perception that European troops in UNIFIL could be held hostage by those trying to push for a consensus candidate.

SUPPORT FOR SINIORA BORDER INITIATIVE

¶ 9. (C) Checchia confirmed that PM Siniora had raised the idea of a hybrid border security force with Arab participation and European technical assistance, adding it would be difficult for the Syrians to object. Checchia agreed that FM Moratino's proposal for a EU-Syria border initiative was a bad idea.

FELTMAN